

LINDA ROLLS HER HEAD ON THE PILLOW, unravelling a thin web of sleep from her sore skull. It was only an hour ago that she was up with him.

He can't need anything more. She has washed him. He has had all her milk. Perhaps the room is too cold. The landlord has not turned the heat on yet. During the night, cold fog rolls in across the highway.

She heaves herself up and peers into the laundry basket beside the bed where he is frantically waving his small arms. She pats him the way the nurse showed her. There are no heat lamps, rockers, bottles, or humming machines for comfort here. *This baby is a little fighter, Linda tells herself, a wild one, like his father.*

On their third date, Brad had grabbed her suddenly en route to the car, pushed her down into the tall grass bordering the highway, and unzipped his pants in the headlights.

Hold on for dear life, she had told herself later, brushing the twigs out of her hair in the bathroom mirror. *That's the only way with a wild man.*

Her baby's cries are staccato now, in a higher pitch, shrill and pinched between gasps. She switches on the bedside lamp, checks the mugs, finds one with cold coffee and gulps it down. He squints in the glare of the lamp.

"Your legs are too skinny," she says, hoping an explanation will soothe him. "The diapers don't fit you."

She is unsure how old he is. She has forgotten all the names they had chosen.

Day and night have spilled together. Her days, a few hours long, pass in continuous darkness. The blinds are taped shut, but even this has not lured him into lasting sleep.

The darkness also hides the disorder: the scatter of blood-stained underwear, soiled sleepers, chip wrappers, apple cores, Coke cans, crusty dishes, balled-up Kleenex, odd sizes of baby clothes.

She nurses awkwardly, painfully, on her side in the bed as the baby dozes off. She had been dreaming about yellow savannahs and towering waterfalls before his cries woke her. She tried to hold on to these images as she rose from the bed, but couldn't. Now she won't be able to fall back to sleep.

Reaching up from the bed with her free arm, she strips the tape away from a corner of the blind. Suddenly the room seems empty. In the sharpness of the

light, she realizes that her lover is not going to return.

Months ago, she'd asked him how they were going to care for the baby. "You can't cage in a wildcat," he'd said, giving his crotch a gentle tug. For weeks she hadn't been able to reach him by phone.

She thinks of the restaurant briefly, wonders whether Carlos will give her back her job. She'd told him she was leaving for good. Near the end, he'd let her work the late shift when customers weren't too fussy. Brad had been one of them, studying the wine list with a frown.

Who will look after her baby? Quiet him down while she is filling water jugs, lighting flambées, and relating the quality of the Beaujolais? If only her mother and sister weren't so far away. But then she hasn't spoken to either of them since the fourth month. They'd called her pregnancy "trouble" when she'd phoned with the news.

She drifts into sleep, dreaming of a field by the highway, two angels in heaven fluttering like butterflies along a road lined with oak trees.

In the waking world, he has let go of the nipple and is crying again, deep in a tumble of blankets.

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"THE LIGHT IS SO BRIGHT, so clear, this morning. What is it, three, four weeks?" Linda babbles to the blue plush rabbit tucked into the baby's blanket. She is descending the apartment stairway, gripping the handrail, her eyes nearly closed. She has spent two weeks in darkness, apart from the occasional flash of neon outside the window. She is walking with the baby to the bus stop; she wants the bus that will take her beyond the city limits to the Trans-Canada.

Once aboard, the baby sleeps soundlessly on her lap, small and unobtrusive. No one on the bus notices them.

An hour later, she walks along the gravel shoulder of the highway, a bundle nuzzled in the crook of her arm. On either side of the highway are grassy fields. There are no high-rises here, no houses. Eventually she reaches an overgrown dirt road, an old lane lined with oak trees leading to an abandoned farmhouse.

Standing at what was once a front gate or lawn swing—a few sun-bleached pickets of fibrous wood lying in the grass—she stares up at the vacant windows.

Tightening her grip on the baby, she pushes open the door. Inside there is a musty smell, broken glass under the window. She retreats, stumbling down the step, and hurries back to the road.

Half a mile further down, the road fades among corky orchards then vanishes

completely. She wipes the back of her neck and walks on.

Leaves shuffle sunlight. Dirt squeezes into her sandals. The baby's forehead sticks to her bare arm. He is asleep and looks almost peaceful, as if he senses what lies ahead. He breathes in irregular puffs and then sighs. Small hands—part pillow, part prayer—clasp the side of his face. A few thin hairs cling to his smooth forehead. She has not noticed this before.

Finally, she reaches an old oak that towers over the others. Some of its bark is loose but the trunk is still strong and solid. Exposed roots have formed a hollow, rounded like an armchair, along the bottom. She stands over it; it is as familiar to her as her own bed. They used to lie in it.

Kneeling slowly into the shadows, she places the stuffed rabbit on her lap and props the baby up against the tree trunk. The bark holds him upright.

He awakes, drowsily, and his opaque blue eyes flit from side to side. She sits down and takes off her sandals, shaking them by the back strap to remove sand. She rubs the bottom of her feet and begins to sing a lullaby.

She stops singing and looks up, suddenly aware of the silence around them. She smiles at her baby under the tree.

"You are happy out here, wild one." She begins to undress him, pulling at the snaps of his terry cloth suit, tugging it over his feet. When he is naked, she places him on the grass. The pale gold of his skin blends in with the sandy ground.

It seems to her that he belongs here, in the field. She imagines him crawling to a nest or burrowing into the earth. "You aren't crying anymore. You will be happy here."

A crow cackles from the top branches of the oak. "Time to go," she calls in a sing-song voice and rises, the blanket under her arm.

A little way down the road, she notices that the rabbit is missing and retraces her steps to look for it. She finds it lying face down next to her naked baby.

"You can't dig yourself a hole here," she says, her voice escalating into a shriek, "can you?" She sees now, with a shock, that he does not have much flesh on him: his calves are shapeless, his legs and feet bowed. He gazes calmly at her and then a small smile tugs at his lips.

She reaches down and grabs him under the arms, forgetting to support his head. Holding his limp limbs tightly against her she hastily collects the blanket and the rabbit.

She is running now, panting, her arms wound about the naked baby.

As the sunlight breaks over her baby's face he screeches, a piercing cry from deep in his neophyte heart.